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Balibrea, Mari Paz (2019) Bou, Enric, and Jaume Subirana, editors. The Barcelona Reader. Cultural Readings of a City. [Book Review]

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This is the accepted version of the following article: Review of Bou, Enric, and Jaume Subirana, editors. *The Barcelona Reader. Cultural Readings of a City*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press/Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017, 442 pp., which has been published in final form in *Catalan Review* XXXIII (2019), pp. 158-160 [<https://doi.org/10.3828/CATR.33.9>].

*The Barcelona Reader. Cultural Readings of a City*. Eds. Enric Bou and Jaume Subirana.

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017. 442 p.

*The Barcelona Reader* is a useful contribution to the bibliographic corpus of texts written in the English language on the Catalan capital. It arrives (and I say this as an author with a book recently published in English on the same city) at what seems to be the tail end of a long period of international fascination with contemporary Barcelona, a place of honour now taken by storm, when it comes to a focus on this region of the world, by the Catalan independence movement and its confrontation with the Spanish state. This dwindling interest extends to the city's status in the global market of tourist destinations: as mid-sized city-break European cities go, the irresistible appeal has now moved to Lisbon. But the shift away is also noticeable with reference to academic focus, and I am referring to the interdisciplinary fields of cultural and urban studies where *The Barcelona Reader* can be broadly located and where the boom took place in the first instance. The Olympic Games and its impact on regeneration, assessed positively or negatively according to the authors; expressions of resistance against gentrification, museification and tourist branding of the city; the *modernista* period and its heritage; Barça; the Madrid-Barcelona rivalry; Barcelona as model of urban regeneration; the way in which cultural and artistic forms (literature, film, museistic institutions, music) grappled with and intervened in each of the above. All are topics that recurred often during the past two *dècades prodigioses* in academic publications, journals as well as monographs, a corpus duly acknowledged by the editors of *The Barcelona Reader* and now joined by their own contribution. That the book responds to the interests raised amongst those two kinds of devoted international audiences -tourists as well as academics- is clear in how the editors in the "Introduction" identify the volume's ideal reader: "We hope that a work of this kind will be an

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invaluable aid for programming new courses on Catalan culture in universities around the world, and it will provide a supplementary guide for sophisticated visitors.” (5)

The book includes original pieces (those by Sagarra, Martí López and King, in addition to the Introduction by the editors) but the great majority, 14 essays, is already published material, in cases adapted or abridged from its original form. The contribution of the volume, as is often the case with this kind of book, is in the selection of articles that readers will now have the comfort of finding all in the same place, and as such *The Barcelona Reader* does an effective job. All articles are, in their respective subjects, certainly amongst the best publications there are on the city: substantial, providing excellent historical and cultural backgrounds, and a wealth of specific and technical detail on the chosen case studies. In the best tradition of cultural history and cultural studies, the volume brings together for study some of the usual suspects matching pre-conceived ideas of Barcelona (in no particular order: Gaudí, modernisme, *4 Gats*, Picasso, Olympic Games, Barça, Cerdà) with some much more unexpected, and yet extremely revealing analyses of cultural objects and phenomena: street names, cemeteries, El Poble Espanyol, the Opera house *El Liceu*, as well as literature and film. There is also a variety of positions with respect to the unavoidable topic of nationalism, by no means the central topic of the book, but certainly recurring, with some articles clearly subscribing it (Joan Ramon Resina’s “From the Olympic torch to the Universal Forum of Cultures: the after-image of Barcelona’s modernity” is perhaps the most obvious, but also clear in the sympathetic fragment from Colm Tóibín’s *Homage to Barcelona*), and others less so (Felipe Fernández-Armesto’s “‘The asylum of modern times’: Barcelona and Europe”), or plainly hostile (Alejandro Quiroga’s “Football and Identities in Catalonia”).

The book is divided into five sections. The first one, “City, History and Territory” is the more panoramic one in offering accounts of the city across the centuries with different types of

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emphases: Davidson's piece, through the trope of siege, and Sagarra's one through that of adaptive ecology, both account for the productive transformations undergone by the city. For their part, Subirana and Fernández-Armesto, respectively pursue the construction of Barcelona's identity in relation to Catalonia and Europe, with the counterpoint of a foreigner's view given by Tóibín's "A fragile country". Part Two, "City and Society", opens with Epps' "Barcelona and Modernity", an excellent critical account of Barcelona's participation in modernity from the 19<sup>th</sup> C to the present, and continues with three cultural case studies that also extend the discussion of ethnic and class identity started in Part 1: football in Quiroga's already mentioned article), cemeteries (Martí Lopez's "Memory and the city in Barcelona's cemeteries") and opera-going (McDonogh's "The family and the city: Power and the creation of cultural imagery"). Part Three, "Art, architecture and the city" includes pieces on two of Barcelona stars: in "Picasso among his fellows at *4 Gats*: Beyond *Modernisme*?" Falgàs gives a most illuminating account of Picasso's relation to Catalan painters built around the space of the *4 Gats*; in "Gaudí: Poet of stone, artistic hedgehog", a devoted Marín i Torné pays homage to the master by illustrating his visionary understanding of architectural materials, aesthetics and work practices, helping the reader in this way to understand his genius. Mendelson's "El Poble Espanyol/El Pueblo Español (1929)" completes this part with a fascinating cultural history of the coming into being of this space during Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, its attempt at providing an idea of Spanish nationalism and the subtle resistances it encountered. Part Four, "The Olympics and the city", despite its title, is principally about the post-Olympic doom and gloom in Barcelona, with Resina in his already cited article focusing on the trivialization of Catalan modernity in the hands of the socialists of the PSC and McNeill's "Barcelona: urban identity 1992-2002", offering a geographer's account of the construction of Barcelona's urban identity. His genealogy goes back to the first democratic municipality of the post-Franco period

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in 1979, to arrive to the post-Olympic period of increasing gentrification and the erasure of memory in the radically commodified and increasingly de-territorialized space of global Barcelona. Finally, Part Five, “Literature, cinema and the city” ties back to topics already discussed in the book through the interpretation of its cultural objects. Fraser’s “A *Biutiful* city: Alejandro González Iñárritu’s filmic critique of the ‘Barcelona Model’” echoes in his analysis of the film the critiques laid out in McNeill’s article. Sobrer’s “*La Gran Encisera*: Three odes to Barcelona, and a film” analyses three extolling poems to the city by Verdaguer, Maragall and “Pere Quart”, finding in each of them a commitment to the city and its Catalanism. It concludes, in a pessimistic tone not unlike Resina’s, that current homages to the city such as those by Almodóvar completely do away with its linguistic specificities. Finally, King’s “The deceptive dame: Criminal revelations of the Catalan capital” provides a survey of 20<sup>th</sup> C crime fiction focusing on the city and highlighting the genre’s ability, either in Spanish or in Catalan, for political criticism which, once again, takes us to McNeill’s and Resina’s accounts.

Regardless of the tyrannies and whims of fashion and the tourist market, the variety of articles gathered in *The Barcelona Reader* do justice to the city’s fascination and complexity. The volume will certainly be of use to those wanting to learn about Barcelona, whether in a formal educational context or for self-enrichment.

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